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Catching the World's Eye

Stories about individual residents can become media events, focusing positive attention on seniors and the good work providers do.

by Kim Fernandez

When it comes to media attention, scandals and bad news sell. Those who work in aging services have seen how stories of poor care in a handful of communities contribute to public distrust directed at all providers.

An important remedy for this perception lies in the stories of the seniors we work for. Every provider serves elders who have lived long and fascinating lives—and who continue to get the most out of life. Positive media attention aimed at seniors has the additional effect of showcasing the quality work done by aging-services providers. Here is how some providers have benefited from positive media attention for their residents.

Few residents of [Charles Major Manor](#), Shelbyville, Ind., will forget the day in December 2008 when three SUVs pulled into the community's parking lot. The mini-motorcade drew immediate attention from the residents, and things only escalated when the doors opened and Santa Claus and his elves emerged.

"It's a very active community," says Chris Ragon, public relations manager for [Retirement Housing Foundation \(RHF\)](#), which owns the property. "They helped raise money for a boy in the area who needed surgery that year. They're always doing things for charities in the area, and they decorate their community room to look like a Las Vegas chapel on Valentine's Day for couples to renew their vows."

All of this brings the local press to the community pretty regularly, and the news stories that year prompted Santa to show up with his trucks packed with a bag of gifts for each resident, a large flat-screen television, and a Wii system with games.

Shelbyville is a small town but, Ragon says, "To this day, the manager doesn't know who Santa Claus was." His gifts, however, have helped the community launch a successful senior Wii bowling tournament and gotten residents a little more active on a regular basis.

That, says Ragon, is the kind of good that can come from staying in touch with the media and encouraging them to write stories about seniors in all parts of the continuum.

"I honestly feel that good begets good," she says. "It's a snowball thing. People hear more and they know there's a need and they want to help. Let them know where to help, and it will make a difference."

Jennifer Van Cleave, director of communications for [Morningside Ministries](#), San Antonio, Texas, agrees. "We have more than 800 residents," she says. "There are tons of stories there. So many people have so many interesting histories."

She frequently pitches [those stories](#) to the local and national news media, using news hooks when she can. "We had a [story published](#) about one of our residents who worked on the Apollo XIII mission," she says. "We held onto that story until we could find a timely event to tie it to, and the 40th anniversary of the mission worked out well." She says it's exactly the kind of story about an individual resident that can help boost the entire community.

"We don't pitch too many stories about the community, but we do a lot about the people who live in the community," she says. "It helps us show that older people still have exciting, passionate lives, and that they still make contributions to society. We don't want to forget those stories."

Van Cleave and many other community managers are staunch supporters of bringing the media to communities to cover stories of individual residents or groups of residents whose stories are interesting. These include their personal histories and ties

to news events, and how retirees contribute to their communities. Accounts of residents doing good—from knitting scarves to send to deployed soldiers to organizing special events for their own neighbors—are popular with the media and resonate with readers. While they can and do give a wonderful boost to the individuals covered in the media, they also reflect well on the communities, which often see residual interest when news about their residents is published or broadcast. Communities also are reaching out to social media, including blogs and Facebook, to spread stories outside of the mainstream media.

Finding Stories

“Within this [field], there is a tendency to look past our residents as we market our communities,” says communications consultant Daniel Pryfogle, principal and creative director of Signal Hill, Cary, N.C. “We use advertising that features not our residents, but stock photography with an average model age that is 20 years younger than the average age of our residents. We have a fetish for youth, and senior living is not immune to that.”

Pryfogle says breaking through those self-imposed limitations is key for media relations managers hoping to increase their media coverage by telling residents’ unique stories.

“We are constantly telling our clients that every one of their communities has hundreds of stories,” he says. “Every resident, no matter their level of care, has a great story to tell. And taking a narrative story approach is the most powerful marketing available to senior living communities. As you tell rich stories, consumers, be they prospective residents or their families, are going to say, ‘Wow. Those are the kinds of neighbors I want to have,’ or ‘That’s the kind of neighborhood I want Mom and Dad to be in.’”

The stories about residents tend to travel, as particularly interesting or intriguing tales are picked up by wire services and transmitted nationwide. Remember [Oscar the Cat](#)? His seeming ability to sense when residents are near death, and habit of shedding his otherwise-icy demeanor to sit with them, made national news. It also spawned a [best-selling book](#) that shines a positive light on the lives of nursing home residents and the small Rhode Island nursing home, [Steere House Nurs-](#)

Menorah Park Center for Senior Living



Shirley Guralnik, a resident at Menorah Park’s Stone Gardens Assisted Living Center, got a lot of media coverage when staff helped her achieve one of her dreams—a ride on a motorcycle—70 years after her first ride. Merle Gorden, the mayor of Beachwood, Ohio, took Guralnik for a spin and got a lot of media exposure for himself as well.

[ing and Rehabilitation Center](#), where Oscar lives.

“One community I work with discovered that in their skilled nursing area, the residents had a fantasy football league,” says Randy Eilts, director of public relations for GlynnDevins Advertising & Marketing, Overland Park, Kan. “That story got coverage in the *Boston Globe*. It’s something people don’t think about, and the media loved it.”

He’s pitched all sorts of stories, from the women who visited community groups in historical costumes and talked about different points in U.S. history, to the story of a community nurse who wrote a first-person essay about her own career path during National Nursing Week. Eilts says each one is beneficial to each community.

“The benefit overall is that it gives exposure of the community to a broader audience, and not just the people who receive your direct mail pieces or people who might see an ad in the paper,” he says. “It gives residents and your staff a real face and a personality, and it might just resonate enough for somebody to say, ‘Hey, I like what’s going on there and I like those people. Maybe I should check it out.’”

Some communities ask residents to fill out detailed questionnaires about their lives and interests when they move in, which staff can review for possible media-worthy stories. Others say keeping in close contact with activity personnel and floor staff is priceless in that regard.

Sherry Gavanditti, director of public relations and marketing for [Menorah Park Center for Senior Living](#), Beachwood, Ohio, knew she had a great story on her hands when she heard about 10 residents, ages 89 to 97, planning their own [Bat Mitzvah ceremony](#), as they had grown up in an era when girls were often denied their own ceremonies. The story flew around the globe, carried on major television networks and published in *The New York Times* and many other papers; even the BBC and an Israeli paper covered the event.

“If you see something or someone or a program that you believe in and think should be put out there, explore all the angles and think about the media you’re pitching,” says Gavanditti. “The first thing this story did was show that you’re never too old to accomplish a dream, and that inspired not only women, but all people in the senior age range.” The story led

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to letters and donations and calls from around the world to Menorah Park, and gave the women a huge boost.

“We’re in close contact with all of our directors and administrators, and we carefully review the monthly calendars and newsletters” to find stories, she says. “It’s a lot of planning, and you have to be able to be kind of intuitive about what may pique the interest of the general public; you’re looking for sto-

ries that are motivating and define aging in a positive light.”

That said, PR pros are cautious that residents and families are kept in the loop and are aware and supportive of stories that may run in the media.

“You really have to let the residents know what’s happening and be sure they want the attention,” says Gavanditti. “You can’t just start getting media attention for people who might

How a Moment of Warmth Became a Positive Media Story

by Harry Hobson

My mother spent the last five years of her life in a very fine Catholic nursing home in Ohio. I had just made a move from First Community Village in Columbus, Ohio, to Westminster Canterbury in Irvington, Va., at the time. On one of my early trips back to see Mother, I arrived just in time for an evening barbeque. It became a fond memory for us. As I wheeled my mother back inside, she asked me to stay so we could visit longer. She preferred the lobby to make sure she didn’t miss anything.

The other residents retired to their rooms for the night. It was just the two of us sitting in the lobby, reminiscing for about half an hour, when three young people walked through the front door with musical instrument cases. I overheard them say they were there to quietly play some music on their guitars and sing, hoping some residents would come out of their rooms to join in a sing-a-long.

It was a touching experience to see how many residents, one by one, came down the hallway and into the lobby. Before long, the lobby filled up with perhaps 18 or so sweet people. Some began to hum, others sang the words, while even more simply closed their eyes and smiled. This was a WOW experience, even for me, as a long-term care professional of over 25 years at the time.

I thought to myself, *this* is the kind of thing the public needs to witness. Based on past experience, I knew it would be an uphill struggle to get media attention. Then I had an idea.

Even though it was about 8 p.m., I called Eyewitness News, WBNS in Columbus, and got through to the news director’s desk. When the lady answered I said, “Hello, my name is Harry Hobson and my mother is in a nursing home, and there is something going on here that the public needs to know about!” I continued, “This is not only happening to my *elderly* mother,” I emphasized, “but to the other residents as well!”


You wouldn’t believe how quickly my excitement captured her attention. She said, “Mr. Hobson, please tell us what is going on and we can get a crew out there right away!”

I continued, “My mother and her friends are experiencing a quality event. There is a lobby filled with beautiful, yet vulnerable residents, who are recapturing some of their fondest memories thanks to three caring volunteers and staff who are leading a sing-a-long.”

The editor responded by saying, “Mr. Hobson, that is very nice but it is not newsworthy.” I replied by telling her that I had predicted her answer myself. I then asked her if she had anyone in her life who was being cared for in a nursing home. To my mild surprise she quietly replied, “Yes, Mr. Hobson, my grandmother is in a nursing home in Cleveland.” She said, “I love her very much and worry about her all of the time. I can only hope that she experiences events like the one you are describing.”

There was a pause and then to my true surprise she said, “Where is your mother’s nursing home?” I told her and she said with confidence, “A crew is on the way!” She went on to agree that they need to do more balanced reporting, and this is the kind of story she would be proud to be a part of.

I went back inside and stood in the corner and just observed the sing-a-long with a very warm heart. A short time later the news truck arrived and they asked the nurse in charge if they could film and do a story. She got appropriate approval and the story was presented the following day in the morning and noon reports. Not only did the audience become better informed about nursing homes, but you should have seen the excitement on many of the residents’ faces when they watched the report.

The moral of the story? Never underestimate our ability and influence as long-term care professionals to educate the media as to what is important for the public to know ... and from time to time, it may be necessary to personalize the experience in order to create a vested interest on their part. 

Harry Hobson is president and CEO of Plymouth Harbor on Sarasota Bay, Sarasota, Fla.